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HOW DOES ART THINK?
BORIS PASTERNAK’S (POST-)PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY

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Abstract
The objective of this paper is to examine the profound ties that link philosophy and poetry in Boris Pasternak’s theoretical and poetical works in the perspective of a broader problematic of relations between philosophy and poetry. I argue that Pasternak’s writings do not simply bear the imprints of his prior engagement with philosophy, but that his poetry as such can be interpreted, at least in some of its aspects, as a result of his philosophical vision of the world shaped back in Marburg, in his readings of Kant and Cohen. In his poetic work he manages to redefine the limits between philosophy and art and to elaborate a new approach to some poignant philosophical problems.
Keywords: B.L. Pasternak; I. Kant; H. Cohen

One can pose a question in this way: what does art think and how does it think; this question has to sound transcendentally. It is not a question of thoughts […] coming on a visit to art. It is a question of how art receives them.
(B. Pasternak, From the Notes to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason)

When attempting to tackle this intricate problem, the relation between philosophy and poetry, one might start by evoking those poets who have always
attracted philosophical scrutiny because of their special disposition towards reflection and their eagerness to put some of their meditations into almost aphoristic, sometimes rather enigmatic, formulas. This ontological closeness of poetry to philosophy was emphatically proclaimed by Heidegger, and, as some of his analyses show, there are poets who seem to lend themselves especially well to a philosophical study. We think first of all of Hölderlin, but also in the 20th century of Paul Celan, René Char or Wallace Stevens, to take poets of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Among Russian poets of the beginning of the 20th century, a time of unprecedented effervescence in the arts, perhaps only Osip Mandel’štam received a higher appraisal from the philosophers, and this due to his sense of history, of the time after revolution and at the dawn of Stalin’s terror.

But as philosophy becomes frequently attracted to poetry seeking in it some privileged position in accessing reality, so can poetry as well fall under the spell of philosophy feeling the urge to address poetically some of its eternal metaphysical problems.

In order to investigate the possibility of interactions between poetry and philosophy as such, one should problematize this relation from the very outset: how can one world dealing with the general, with abstract concepts and with universal categories, be relevant to, or at least come to terms with, the world of the particular, the transient, the immediate? And if there were two worlds, incompatible at the first glance, might there still be any transfers, any passages, any crossings, or any subterranean pathways possible? What I mean by transfer is not simply the fact that a concept, in the case of philosophy, or an image, in the case of literature, manages to bridge this gap between the two worlds in order to make itself useful in a different domain. It is rather a way in which a concept or an image is transformed at the very moment of its being replaced and planted into a new soil. What does it bring with it? What happens, on the one hand, when a concept, an idea, or even a philosophical intuition – a more subtle organism in philosophical thought – is appropriated by a writer? What happens, on the other hand, when a philosopher tries to seize a literary image? In other words, should we posit that the concept immediately loses its conceptuality, its systematic character, whenever it is used in literature, and, conversely, the image taken over by philosophy becomes a concept itself?

Indeed, concepts and images (or “percepts”, as Gilles Deleuze calls them; Deleuze, Guattari 1994), rough as this opposition can be, are usually considered as important criteria of the distinction between philosophy and poetry. They represent different modes of relating to reality, different tools of processing experience. And yet, we can suppose that in every image utilized in philosophy and in every concept applied in poetry there remains something from their origin: a nebula of conceptuality that surrounds an image borrowed from philosophy and a nebula of poeticism that surrounds a concept formed out of a literary image. The possibility of such an interaction between lite-
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The mobilization of images within a philosophical system may be only encouraged and acclaimed as it helps to render philosophical concepts more flexible, more subtle, as if they became closer to the immediate concrete world of experience. In his lectures on philosophical terminology, Theodor W. Adorno emphasizes the affinity between art and philosophy in what he calls their attachment to “expression” or “expressiveness” (“Ausdruck”). The difference between art and philosophy lies only in the fact that art grasps in immediate fashion something that philosophy is always obliged to represent through concepts.® Later Gilles Deleuze dreamt of crossing this conceptual boundary between art and philosophy, by elaborating an immanent aesthetics viable both for philosophy and for art, which he called “transcendental empiricism or science of the sensible” (Deleuze 1994: 56), based on pure sensible experience. This aesthetics, a combination of Kantian “transcendentalism” and simple “empiricism”, is neither determination of “what can be represented in the sensible”, nor an “attempt to withdraw the pure sensible from representation and to determine it as that which remains once representation is removed”. But, concludes Deleuze, “empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetics an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible: difference” (56-57). But artists themselves, and especially modernist writers of the first half of the 20th century became quite interested in philosophy, and not only because of their need for a critical apparatus they could use for their reflections on art, but also because of the creative potential they saw in philosophy.®

The work of Boris Pasternak, in this era of dissolution of stable frontiers between arts and philosophy,® can be of particular interest. His poetry and theoretical writings offer a fruitful and pertinent example of how conceptual structures borrowed from philosophy can integrate a new form of relations, between the poetical (or lyrical) “I” and the world, how that which is only reflected upon, represented philosophically, can join pure artistic (poetic) experience. Manifesting a particular sensibility towards philosophical problems owing to his profound philosophical training, Pasternak strives to respond to them in a strictly poetic manner. At the same time his very interest in philosophy is imbued with aesthetic issues: the question of the special status of art, of its essence and its origins, appears already in his early theoretical writings. This article will explore Pasternak’s complex relation to philosophy and the impact it had on his poetry in the perspective of a broader problem – that of possible transfers between philosophy and poetry. In order to reveal the exact nature and form of this relation, it will especially attempt to clarify what it means to make a transition between philosophy and poetry and how the case of Pasternak can exemplify this transition.
When reading his verse, it is hard to believe that Boris Pasternak had ever had anything to do with philosophy. His poetic language – which he was trying to refine, to simplify through his entire life – never included any terms, concepts or even metaphors that would incline us to consider his verse as philosophically pregnant.Thematically, as well, his poetic vision is directed exclusively towards the phenomena of everyday life, sensations of nature and weather, with all the richness of feelings and emotions that they may evoke. There is no place for meditations, contemplations of one’s inner self, no poetical “staging” of thought whatsoever. We find some explanations to it in his biography: after specializing in philosophy during his studentship, he abruptly abandons it, entirely devoting himself to poetry. From this time onward, he seems to have completely ousted philosophy from his occupations. The summer semester of 1912 that he spent in Marburg studying under the supervision of Hermann Cohen proved crucial for this decision. Cohen’s work on epistemology and theory of knowledge was of special interest to Pasternak. Pasternak was fascinated by his ability to create the whole world out of thought, by the power of “straightforward” and “self-sufficient” thinking. His stand against psychologism and his suspicion of every form of speculative idealism was compatible with Pasternak’s aspirations: his fight against the relative, the ramblings of consciousness, the accidental and unnecessary character of judgments and statements, against arbitrariness or randomness of common knowledge. During this study semester Pasternak presented several papers, and with some success, as far as we can judge from his letters to parents and friends. But, when he was really close to succeeding and about to be recognized by his master, Cohen, the flaws that he saw in himself, restraining him from becoming a “professional” philosopher, seemed already to be fatal. Indeed, Pasternak kept deliberately separating love, poetry, emotions (the summer in Marburg held also an important event in his love life), from philosophy, as if philosophy had nothing to do with life, with experience, but was only a Spartan training of the mind. But at the same time, as Lazar Fleishman has convincingly shown, the moment of his highest philosophical success in Marburg had something of a poetic, creative inspiration, and the finishing of his paper for Cohen’s seminar gave way to an outburst of a poetic writing. Therefore, this is no wonder that his letters of this period, measuring his moods and aspirations during his scholarship in Marburg, contain contradictory confessions. First, he finds that his passion for philosophy was too much of an impulse, an emotion, that to become a philosopher (a scientific one), one must study the object of thought, analyze, argue it well, but not experience, or feel. The scholarly aspect of philosophy somehow obstructed for him all other ways to approach and apprehend phi-
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losophy. In another letter he exclaims: “how little of philosophy there is in me!”¹² Strongly attracted by “pure reflection”, he admits to having devoured too many philosophical books to be capable of organizing all of it into a coherent “system”. But he also complains, in the same letter, that the simplicity he found in philosophy at the beginning of his studies, the simplicity that accompanies the coming of a system into the world had disappeared, and even if one day he should become a philosopher, it would only be a matter of voluntarily forcing himself to pursue this path. We can thus follow Pasternak’s hesitations throughout his Marburg correspondence, until his final resolution to break with philosophy is declared and repeated in his letters to Aleksandr Štich (from 11th, 17th and 25th July 1912). From now on Pasternak considers his philosophical training a digression from the path towards true creation, which only poetry could provide him with.¹³

Yet one thing seems clear: in spite of this decision to entirely dismiss philosophy, Pasternak remains deeply indebted to it as he continues to investigate the nature of art and creation. In fact, the most recent scholarly works show that Pasternak never really abandoned the philosophical type of thinking, and that not only his poetics, but even his poetry were shaped by his prior philosophical studies. In order to become a poet, Pasternak needed a clear starting point, a steady rooting in the world that only philosophy could provide him with – and this is what Boris Gasparov, the author of a recent book on Pasternak, describes as a positive contribution of philosophy to Pasternak’s world.¹⁴ According to Pasternak’s characterizations of himself, he was of too receptive and sensitive a nature; he needed something to prevent himself of getting lost in the frenetic whirlpool of impressions. But he did not resort to philosophy because he was unable to cope with outer impressions and their emotional impact, philosophy was not there to save him: it was there to provide him with a springboard making possible his leap into the things so that he could perfectly disappear among them.¹⁵ Philosophy is the first impetus, the point of departure that was negated, annihilated and at the same time preserved in this poetic leap. So it was not, so to say, a rescue from, but a rescue to, in order to achieve or to accomplish something in poetry. That is why, claims Gasparov, the philosophical model that served Pasternak the best was the critique of knowledge he found in Cohen. Cohen’s project aimed at getting rid of subjectivity even in the form of a simple grammatical presence, of the copula “am”; it pursued a perfect immanence of abstract knowledge, which is not oriented towards its object but entirely penetrates it. Cohen’s philosophy was for Pasternak an ideal of the logical thought that art should envy and at the same time abandon for the sake of its own creative activity. And Gasparov concludes by asserting that Pasternak was not just viewing art as “anti-philosophical”, but was aware of its deviation in relation to logical thought, its a-normality as regards the organized and
regulated world of a philosophical system. So, art comes always after philosophy, is in a sense preconditioned by its philosophical background.

Philosophy provides Pasternak with a clear cognizing position, as Boris Gasparov justly notices. But we should go further by suggesting that Pasternak’s poetic system is not just built upon the schemes borrowed from philosophy, but offers a resolution to some problems first formulated by philosophy (and Kantian in the first place). For the purposes of our analysis, we will choose two distinct oppositions present in Pasternak’s reflections and inherited from Kant: that of the subject/object and that of the transcendental/phenomenal. They appear in the context of the major preoccupation of young Pasternak during the first years of his studentship: the urgent necessity not only to understand the ties between art and philosophy, but ultimately to find the way to prove the superiority of art to philosophy, at which point art would be the only possible outcome and the only viable resolution to any philosophical question. That is why, in order to investigate those questions, along with addressing Pasternak’s early theoretical writings, beginning with the year 1910, we will analyze two poems, written several years after the declared break with philosophy, but that seem directly related to the philosophical problematic drafted in those theoretical writings. We will see how the reflections first expressed by means of the philosophical language re-emerge in the poetical language and are at the same time transformed by it.

“Free Qualities”. A Critique of the Kantian Subject

In July 1910, in a letter to Ol’ga Frejdenberg, Pasternak attempts to give an account of a powerful poetic vision that made him all of a sudden sense and experience the world differently. He is groping for appropriate words in order to convey those inner feelings to Ol’ga, appealing both to the memories they share: of what they experienced together earlier, conversations they had, observations they made, etc. A few times in this long letter he regrets not making himself sufficiently clear and even exclaims: “Oh, how difficult it is to put this in words, Olya!” (Pasternak 1981: 14). We find him entirely consumed by what he tries to describe: the streets and its outskirts in their independent, eventful life, to which Pasternak ascribes the capacity to approach us, almost impend upon us, and calls this phenomenon “the advent of [the] surroundings” (11). But in his attempt to find the right words he constantly turns to philosophy. In this poetic vision he tries to describe the things that present themselves as liberated from the usual synthesizing form of our subjectivity. The world around us, affirms Pasternak, is something that is in accordance with our habits, something we are used to, something we have to take into account, as long as we consider it as a “given” (14). But then there comes a moment when things are no longer regarded as determined, settled,
“things we have found the solution for and dismissed”, they become problematic, “unreal, or rather not yet real, because they still have to receive the form of their new reality” (ibid.). This new form is not accessible to man, it flees, and it avoids any appropriation. Reality lacking its usual form presents itself as a set of qualities, free moving qualities, difficult to understand, as they do not enter in any pre-established framework. This concept of “free qualities” newly invented by Pasternak aims at grasping the essence of this poetically transfigured world. All the surroundings, not only the city and its people, but life itself, become “free quality”, quality without a pre-established form. Here is how Pasternak describes, in the same letter, his experience of the city of St. Petersburg, seen from a cab, when he comes to the realization of this formless existence of things:

As we rode along in the cab, the city seemed to be endless content without a plot, without material attributes – an overflow of the most fantastic content, dark, throbbing, feverish, in frantic search of a plot, a lyrical motif [...] If you are prepared to recognize the uniqueness and exceptionality of such a concept of the city and all objective things, and if you keenly feel this uniqueness, then you will understand my saying that the poet, when in such a mood, does not remark that which is characteristic and does not make observations, but merely confirms facts; the verbs and nouns of the world you are experiencing, finite nouns and verbs, are transformed into adjectives, into a whirlpool of qualities, which must be ascribed to concepts of the very highest order – to things, a reality, inaccessible to us. (14-15)

This shift in perception operated by the poet detaches things from the usual causal bonds that link them to each other, liberates them from their functions in everyday life. Pasternak describes in detail the particularizing, singularizing act of artistic vision, which does not seek to identify things, to observe, or to generalize, but only records their states, the changes in their qualities. Things and actions dissolve themselves into pure qualities in search of a new form. And this new form is no longer related to usual categories of our intellection, they tend to an unknown form or category that would provide the necessary synthesis, different from that practiced by philosophy. Pasternak calls it “the Lyrical”. This form presented as power or energy animating things from within, can only be produced by Art. It has nothing to do with a personal inspiration: “there are inspired perceptions of the objective world” (15) claims Pasternak. In this reasoning the poet attempts to substitute a new form of subjectivity originating in Art for the Kantian subjectivity limited to a form of cognition. There is something in art that goes beyond cognition and this is what Pasternak the poet intends to explore later.

No wonder then that the reflections Pasternak drafts in this letter are developed and specified in another, more theoretical attempt to present his
conception of art. The last year of the university, after his return from Marburg, he gives a talk called ‘Symbolism and Immortality’ to the participants of the Moscow “Circle for Study of Problems of Aesthetic Culture and Symbolism in Art”. Although the only thing left of it is its synopsis, it can still give us a clear idea of what preoccupied Pasternak’s thought at this moment. It opens with the following words: “The feeling of immortality accompanies experience when we teach ourselves to see subjectivity not as something belonging to personality but as a property of quality in general.” And he continues: “Subjectivity is a category sign of quality; in it is expressed the logical impermeability of quality considered independently. Qualities are enveloped by consciousness which liberates them from connection with personal life, returns them to their immemorial subjectivity and is itself imbued with this tendency” (Pasternak 2010: 40). Pasternak proceeds on the basis of the Kantian point of view, but instead of questioning the transcendental structures of the Subject (of knowledge) he is interested in the singular character of the objective reality itself. If we abandon the instance of the cognizing subject we find ourselves in front of the object affected by this (unknown) subject, permeated by a different kind of subjectivity. Things as phenomena, as long as they cannot appear as they are in themselves, are pure qualities that receive their determination through a higher consciousness or subjectivity. In quite a Kantian manner, Pasternak claims that the structures of the object reflect exactly those of the subject. But in contrast to Kant, he attempts to save qualities from their appropriation by a cognizing subject, by abstract thought, affirming their “logical impermeability”; in doing so he grants them their own subjective value. Qualities are not derived from the personality of the poet, nor are they an empirical quintessence of all individual experiences and all personalities that ever existed, they are “immemorial”, and in this sense, “objective”. In this respect, the Kantian term “category” has a primordial importance for Pasternak: it attests to the fact that the object benefits from the same status as the subject; it is organized according to its own forms of “objective” subjectivity.

When defining art and artistic vision of the world Pasternak obviously makes use of philosophical terms and takes philosophy as a contrasting mode of cognition. Whereas philosophy seeks to unify the qualities of things, to attribute them to distinct concepts or forms related to our powers of intellect, to the structures of subjectivity, art works with qualities as such, it preserves them in their becoming as objective, it only “confirms facts”: its perceptions are depersonalized and do not belong to a subject of cognition any more, they tend to a higher form of synthesis. Yet, this unknown “form” is prefigured, but never realized in art. It is something that makes art possible, – a sketch of a transcendental Object that appeals to an effort of creation, but never exhausts itself through it.
But in order to open the poetic vision to this new attitude towards the surrounding world, one needs to perform something like a critique of the purely cognizing, quasi-philosophical posture that art may sometimes assume. Pasternak’s pure lyricism was not just a way of rejecting philosophy, but a more profound integration of the philosophical into the poetical and the subsequent transformation of it, as we can see it all over the pages of his first successful (and mature) book of poems *My Sister – Life*, written in 1917, but published in 1922. We shall analyze the poem ‘The Weeping Garden’ (1917), very explicit, owing to its composition, of this kind of critique of subjectivity. Then, that which is interpreted by Pasternak scholars as the poet’s decision to minimize the presence of the lyrical subject should rather be regarded as a poetical response to the transcendental subject of philosophy.

Dreadful! It drips and listens –
whether it is still alone in the world
crushing a twig like lace at the window
or – is there a witness?

Audible, though, the pressure
of porous earth’s taut swellings
and far away, as happens in August,
midnight grows in the fields.

No, no sound, no witness.
Convinced that no one’s there,
it starts its old game up again, rolls
down roofs, over gutters.

I’ll lift to my lips and listen –
whether I still alone in the world,
ready to break into sobs if I need to
or – is there a witness?

Quietness. Not a leaf shifting.
No dot of light, except weird
gulps, splashing about in slippers,
lulls full of sighs, and tears.

In the first three stanzas the garden itself is a protagonist or, more precisely, the wind and the rain reigning in the garden have completely transformed its aspect during the storm. Suddenly there is a suspension, a halt when the question about a possible witness occurs to the garden (as if it could “think”) – as if a witness could interfere in this natural event, in what is happening, and affect the progress of the things. After making sure that nobody is there the garden resumes its activity (splashing, squeezing branches,
and so on). The fourth stanza introduces another protagonist: there is an “I” that emerges. This “I” is not counted as an observer, it (he/she?) is there, and yet it is not a witness (otherwise the garden would have taken it for one). Just like the garden in the first stanza it is wondering whether it is alone, or someone might be observing. And quite similarly, the “I” figuring out if someone is watching, does not take this roaring and splashing garden for a witness. The first and the fourth stanzas reflect each other in a quite symmetrical way, by asking the same question: “Is there a witness?” Moreover, between the human weeping (the “I” in the last stanza is about to weep, unless there is a witness) and the raining in the garden there is a visible literary parallel, a probable allusion to a line of Paul Verlaine: “It is weeping in my soul as it is raining on the city”. So “I” (or the poetic, lyrical self, as some may say) and the garden are symmetrical in their respective actions and dispositions, no one prevails, no one dominates the other (“raining” equals “crying”). Both of them are part of what is happening, without being opposed to each other, without being able to become an observer of each other. Pasternak brings them to the same level, so as to demonstrate that there is no difference in essence between them, so that none of them could pretend at gaining a superior position, becoming a Subject. The last stanza confirms the verdict: there is definitely no witness, no hint of supervising subjectivity. There remain only impersonal actions: gulping and flapping, sighs and weeping, the rare properties of a suddenly decentralized poetic world.

The fear of a beholder, of somebody who may have spotted the events, haunts the poem. But how can we interpret this concern with a witness? It has most certainly philosophical roots. Aware of the Kantian discrimination between the transcendental and the phenomenal, Pasternak questions the category of “I”, of the poetical subject, in order to shatter its dominant position vis-à-vis the perceptive world, its pretention to become a condition of its possibility. He does distinguish between nature and the lyrical self (the “I”), but only to overturn this distinction. There is no place for a transcendental subject. The fear of a witness is the fear of the intruder who, by his organizing (synthesizing) capacity, might disturb the activity of the phenomenal world. This world is merely in movement, in action, it can only invite to participation, but it escapes from being seen. It does not lend itself to observation and, ultimately, to any kind of apperception. In his poetry Pasternak advocates a form of immanentism close to that practiced by Cohen in philosophy. Starting with the idea of transcendental subject, that of a supreme Beholder, he ends up with the conception of some kind of poetic realism – a representation of the world as it is in itself and where the beholder is always included in the events, affected by them, and is therefore incapable of distancing himself from the world.

Poetry covertly reintroduces a philosophical problematic, but instead of affirming a solution to it, it suggests a new distribution of forces, establishing
a new relation between the subject and the world. So this strategy of questioning the Subject results at the same time in a new conception of the object, which we can also call transcendental, based on the Kantian presuppositions of Pasternak’s thought. Further on we shall explore how this idea of the transcendental is forged in Pasternak’s student days and how, once again, it is staged differently in his verse.

Art’s Transcendentality: From Asceticism to Hospitality

A year prior to his stay in Marburg, in summer 1911, Pasternak was working on Kleist. He conceived of an essay entitled ‘Heinrich von Kleist. On Asceticism in Culture’ to commemorate the anniversary of the writer’s suicide. Although the essay was never finished, it contains very precious reflections of young Pasternak, student in philosophy and a timidly beginning poet, on the nature of possible interactions between philosophy and art. The involvement with Kant’s philosophy that presumably caused Kleist’s suicide is not directly mentioned in the essay, but it is clear that Pasternak was already at that time fascinated by this – sometimes disastrous – power philosophy can exert over poetry and was eager to unveil its sources. Pasternak specifies the position of philosophy towards art in terms of a distinction between “synthesis” and “system”. It is noteworthy that he does not invent it himself, this distinction was already largely in use in the philosophical debates of that time. This opposition is put forward, for instance, in an editorial of the philosophical journal Logos, to which Pasternak was close at the time of its first issues, as it was a mouthpiece of strongly neo-Kantian Russian philosophers. The authors of the editorial polemically put forth the concept of “system” against that of “synthesis”, a concept utilized by a certain spiritual, religious philosophy, like that professed by Vladimir Solov’ev. This philosophy, while wishing to bring into harmony all spheres of human being – art, philosophy, religion – took those spheres as given from the start, refusing to construct and incorporate them progressively in the very movement of analyzing thought. “System”, a term positively connotated by the Logos authors, referred, on the contrary, to philosophy as a rigorous science requiring the systematic study of its object, that would eventually lead to a form of synthesis, but only when the system of philosophical sciences is completely shaped. Pasternak, according to the suggestion of some of his commentators, maintained the difference between “system” and “synthesis”, although in his essay on Kleist he contrasts art as non-systematic and not synthetic to the search for system and synthesis which drives philosophy.

Pasternak starts the essay by claiming that the function of art is to break with the natural, with the given forms of matter, to perform a negation of reality. It is a first act of true asceticism, which helps the artist to liberate
himself from the realm of the things as they are – in their identity, in their common, daily existence. By penetrating the things in their apparent unity, by dismantling them, one can reveal or unveil “a system of truth” (Pasternak 2010: 36), as Pasternak puts it. When applying the term “system” to the artistic vision of reality, Pasternak wants to stress that even at this preliminary stage the artist is already superior to the philosopher: “he is a philosopher in a larger sense than is anyone else, for his innate and fundamental melody is that of giving up the immediacy of intuition” (35). The artist withdraws his subjectivity from the world. Pasternak calls this procedure “negative dialectics” or “semi-dialectics”, as it stops at the stage of antithesis, without going further, without attaining synthesis. Artist and philosopher start out at the same point, they are both guided by the necessity of this dialectical purification, by affirming the novelty of the things, their otherness. But the philosopher is a real systematician, a consistent one, since he or she aspires to the final synthesis, – “system” would then be a method to proceed towards it – whereas the artist can only perform “the renewed beginnings” (35), and the truth of art lies in this unaccomplished (from the point of view of the philosopher) form. Art never goes beyond this condition. If philosophy proceeds towards synthesis leaving art behind, the only way to grasp the nature of their relation would be this first, preliminary stage, that of “estrangement” of things, as Pasternak calls it. The beginning is this moment of simplicity, the starting point for elaborating a philosophical system, which, as Pasternak confesses in the letter cited above, he was about to lose in Marburg. It is the moment of pure creation for art, the only moment, in which it expresses itself entirely in an artistic or, in Pasternak’s case, poetic form. What is only aspiration to philosophy, a point of departure, is already a culminating point in art. What is present in philosophy as a negative moment in its movement is altogether positive in art.

Art and philosophy have a common source; they share the same initial attitude towards reality. But art makes of this attitude its permanent stand – that of postponing synthesis, preventing it from realization. It is always in the sphere of sheer possibility, which is never actualized, never shaped into a “cultural” form:

An artist does not create culture. He is busy with exercises – he is the ascetic of culture, of culture-in-general, of a possible culture; only rarely is he at the threshold of our, given, culture – usually the place he occupies with his great act points to the irrational possibility of a system – intelligible as an idea, as the idea of a possibility, intelligible on the ascetic threshold, and impossible to fulfil, to create.

The preliminary stage of philosophizing, the stage of estrangements, renunciations of the natural – how germane this must be to the artist! But the artist’s idealism is the idealism of the preliminary stage; where the philosopher matures into a systematic thinker or, pursuing one of
the branches of a system, becomes a scholar, at this point the artist di-
verges from him, for his idealism is a game, not a system, it is sym-
bolical, not real. The possibility that an idea may be transcendental, not
the transcendentality of its possibility. (37)

Philosophy here is of course Kant’s idealist philosophy, the one Kleist
was thoroughly studying and that finally pushed him to the brink of hope-
lessness and despair. Pasternak distinguishes between a philosophical idea-
ism (“system”) and an artistic or aesthetic one (“game” or playing). Trans-
cendent ideas are tied up to pure reason, to the transcendental argument,
which deals with the conditions of possibility of our experience. The absence
of an unconditioned possibility is the source for Kleist’s disappointment, “his
disappointment as a theoretician” (37). Kleist did not see a way in Kant’s
philosophy towards an aesthetical possibility, capable of calling into question
his systematic philosophical construction. His disappointment came from the
incompatibility between his beliefs as a philosopher and the innate fracture
he sensed in them from the point of view of an artist. According to Pasternak,
if Kleist were closer to the circle of the Romantics, he could have been able
to conquer this disappointment by following their conception of playing.24
One should distinguish between art and philosophy. Art questions reality
more profoundly than philosophy, it goes beyond the rational conditions of
its possibility – towards the possibility of the conditions as such. Where phi-
losophy deviates from reality, while attempting to give it a plausible expla-
nation, art remains true to it through the procedure of “renewed beginnings”,
as Pasternak calls it – constantly returning to its origins, to its possibility
about to be actualized. While Kant’s transcendental subject seems to subdue
everything to his power of cognition, the objective of art is to show how the
difficulties and even the contradictions that philosophy tries to reconcile for
the sake of the system are innate to reality and therefore not reconcilable. The
idea of asceticism puts the stress on the practice of art as a spiritual exercise
as it refuses to assume its cultural role, to produce an aesthetic model of
reality equivalent to that provided by philosophy. That is why it is always on
the threshold, and never beyond it, in the sphere of actuality.25

This idea of asceticism is not fortuitous in Pasternak’s thought, it is
altogether present, though in a slightly different context in his student notes
on Kant’s first Critique: it is developed further into the idea of hospitality.

Pasternak attempts to formulate a “transcendental question” that may
be applicable to art, to poetic creation: “What art thinks and how does it
think?” A little farther on he prolongs this question into a sketch of an an-
swer: “[…] how does art receive its guests [thoughts], as we will see that
later, it waits for guests that do not exist; […] they are non-existent because
they are expected” (Pasternak 1996, 2: 30). As we can see here, Pasternak
offers a poetic, imaginative exemplification of Kant. According to Pasternak,
Kant’s system responds to the question “what”, but not to the question “how”. Kant teaches us to think about “hospitality” (about the “host”, subjective structures), but not about the “guests” (thoughts or objects themselves). But the situation of hospitality involves not only the relationship between the host and his guest: before being a practice it is an essential attitude, an aptitude and a willingness to receive. Pasternak contrasts the hospitality of science (philosophy understood as science) with the hospitality of art. The first act of knowledge comes through science, that is how we discover things for the first time. Philosophy receives thoughts as its objects; it invites them to cross the threshold, which in Kant’s case is schematic time, forms of sensibility. But as soon as we leave the house and go across the threshold we abandon the things, leave them to the host. We know nothing about them any more, but we learned the laws of hospitality, the subject and its transcendental character. That enables us, continues Pasternak, to ask about the hospitality of art. The question itself already marks a shift compared to the Kantian questions (“What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?”; Kant 1998: 677). The subject or subjectivity that Pasternak is concerned with is not the Kantian cognizing subject, it is the subject of Art, or the subject of the aesthetic experience, which is determined, as we could see, not by its structure (“what” it is), but by its mode or attitude (“how” it functions) towards its object.

A few lines later Pasternak pursues:

[…] how can one understand that which is expected, is awaited at the threshold, […] is there time for what is expected, a schematic time? The future? But the future, if we should understand it in the context of object and time, is an unnecessary word; there are words like these, and Kant mentions them: happiness, destiny, and also, consequently, art or thought; art’s hospitality decorates the time of its expectation with these unnecessary words. (30-31)

As opposed to science and philosophy, art is hospitality without guests; its ascetic practice consists in eternally waiting for guests who will never come. Creation occurs only in this expectation without objects, in the pure act of hospitality, which maintains itself in the direction toward possible guests, but never fulfills itself because receiving guests would signify at once the abolition of hospitality. The schematic Kantian time does not work for the future, or rather, future is no time as it defies an intuitive grasp. Words such as happiness or destiny do not mean anything to philosophy as long as their existence is tied to the representation of the future, i.e. to something we cannot foresee. They are ideas and are not given in the same way the concrete objects are, whose future is included in their present. But they are real for art, they “decorate the time of its expectation”, and in this respect become its
objects. In his poetic manner Pasternak suggests that art as potential creation, as openness into the future can compete with philosophy, that deals all the time with the given.

Words like happiness, thought, creation do remain undetermined because the phenomena they denote can never be realized, fulfilled. But in the province of art, of poetry, they indicate the border at which the transcendental and the phenomenal, as well as the subjective and the objective, can finally meet. Let us switch once again from the plane of philosophy to that of poetry and examine the poem called ‘Happiness’. Written in 1915, three years after Pasternak’s resolution to break with philosophy, it can illustrate the best this mediating position of poetry.

The evening’s whole downpour is used up
By the gardens, and the conclusion is this:
We’ll be subjected by happiness to the same
Torment as by the gathering of clouds.

The turbulent happiness looks like
– Most likely – in face or in form –
The miliard-leaved exultation
Of streets washed cleaned by a storm.

There, peace is concluded. There, thunder
Is stamped with the warmth – like Cain –
Of suburbs, derided by laughter
Of leaves, then forgotten, defamed.

And by laughter of heights. And by hiccups
Of drops. And they’re all the more clear
As the groves can’t be counted: their siftings
Have merged – one sieve, single and sheer.

On flatness of leaves. On an ocean
Of melted buds. On the level
Of the ground of the wild adoration
Of those who are praying to heaven.

The thick isn’t wrung from the bushes.
No crossbill in love behind bars
Splashes ryegrain as pertly as does this
Honeysuckle the scatter of stars.26

(Pasternak 2003-2005, 1: 94)

The main subject of the poem is happiness, but the events described in all of its six stanzas refer to the state of nature after a thunderstorm. The
relation to happiness in these first two stanzas (where it is explicitly men-
tioned) is established by means of a rather complicated analogy. First of all, it
is said that the gardens do not just passively receive the pouring rain; the rain
is not the real agent, but suffers itself from the gardens that seem to suck all
the liquid out of it. Besides this passive/active inverted relationship between
the rain and the gardens, in the fourth line there is the question of clouds. We
can presume that they actually play the role of a counterpart vis-à-vis the
gardens: the gardens (earth) and the clouds (skies) are opposed as two ele-
ments, two natural forces. From this constellation we then can deduce that the
rain is a sort of a mediator between those elements. The swarms of clouds are
tormented by the rain that pours out of them, relating them directly to the
gardens, which seem to absorb, to extinguish all the water, to use it up,
literally and metaphorically. The rain makes the clouds suffer, not the foliage
of the trees. It is an example of inversion of the subject/object structure, a
characteristic sign of Pasternak’s poetry, serving here to emphasize that the
agent itself, i.e. clouds, are no more the source of the rain, but are in a way
affected by it, as long as it mediates between them and the earth (the gardens,
the foliage, the streets). This inversion makes possible the analogy between
the clouds that the rain exposes to the attacks of the streets and gardens and
the “us” that the happiness might expose to the torments. And yet, the happi-
ness is only presupposed, it is not here. It is projected into the future, and the
rainstorm is its prefiguration. Happiness is still an abstract category, which
we attempt to define, whereas the rainstorm is an intensively experienced,
real event. The streets, the clouds, the rain and the gardens are emotionally
laden because they receive something of this expectation of happiness –
happiness that is only potentially or indirectly given, but not present.

In the second quatrains the analogy between happiness and the rainy
weather is expanded to the state of the streets (in their personalized aspect:
“face”) after the passage of the rainstorm. There is an attempt to determine
what happiness is through its comparison with the aspect of the city, and not
by asking what it is in itself. So instead of proceeding from the emotion
(happiness) – as if we already knew what happiness was – the poet tends
towards the outer world discovering the shades and nuances of what might
become happiness. Pasternak speaks about the possible appearance of hap-
niness, he is looking for its “signs”, so the four other stanzas are devoted to a
thorough detection of those signs: nature triumphs over the storm, thunder is
“derided by laughter of leaves”; the heaven, the heights are now clear and the
buds can give themselves to their “wild adoration”; the honeysuckle, in the
last line, splashes wholeheartedly and victoriously with myriads of raindrops
like with “a scatter of stars”. But this exultant activity takes place “there”, as
the poem says, – i.e. in the phenomenal world, and not “here”, where pre-
sumably “we” with our expectation of happiness find ourselves. “Here” and
“there” are thus strictly delimited, but not for long. The way happiness ac-
tually looks like when it comes to nature is the realm of the poem that absorbs progressively all our readers’ attention.

Now we can understand more clearly the meaning of the following passage from ‘Symbolism and Immortality’:

The reality accessible to personality is permeated with the quest for the free subjectivity belonging to quality. Signs of this quest, issuing from reality itself and concentrated in it, are perceived by the poet as the signs of reality itself. The poet submits to the tendency of the quest, imitates it, and conducts himself like the objects around him. (Pasternak 2010: 41)

Happiness then is the purpose of the quest and the surrounding objects mark a pathway leading to it. It is only by imitating the objects, thoroughly registering their interactions, that the poet is able to decipher the meaning of happiness as a larger, synthesizing category: this sketch of a definition through what appears as objectively present in the surrounding world transforms happiness itself, a subjective feeling, into something more substantial, i.e. altogether objective. That is how, through the idea of possibility realized in poetry, Pasternak dissolves the gap between concrete phenomena and abstract notions. The idea of hospitality joins the idea of possibility inasmuch as it stresses the fact that art offers the conditions of a possibility for something to happen, it opens up towards the world, ready to receive it, and the task of the poet is to dispose his visual apparatus, his perception in a way that the surrounding world could first appear before us.

Let us summarize. We attempted to examine how Pasternak’s early theoretical texts with their strong philosophical underpinnings can deliver ideas that afterwards will be explored and expressed in his verse. His theory can thus be unexpectedly clarified through his verse, and his poetry can get a better understanding if we go back and take a look at his theory. The metaphor that we mentioned at the beginning: that of the nucleus and the nebula, proves to be rather relevant. In the first poem, ‘The Weeping Garden’, the subject-object interaction is eliminated through introduction of two distinct possible beholders, but none of them is apt to become a subject, and consequently to be an object for the other. In the second poem, ‘Happiness’, two opposite worlds are brought together: the poem begins with the notion of happiness and attempts to define it analogically over the first two stanzas, but then the definition is abolished through the real actualization of happiness in the phenomenal world – not a human happiness, but that belonging or manifesting itself only in nature. In both poems there are “concepts” that seem to organize them first, but immediately they get overturned, become “images” as they start to signify something different: a complex unity of the
emotional world of the poet and the seen, observed world of the natural things and elements. 

As we could also see in the course of our study, a cluster of questions, but around one problem, is of special concern to Pasternak: How is our relation to the world possible? How do we establish that the reality we observe and try to depict is not just an individual and ephemeral representation? How do we prove that poetic (i.e. subjective) feelings or emotions are real, and not ideal, that they exist objectively? How to make an art of singularities, of particulars, which is poetry, be recognized as universal, as necessary? – those are all philosophical questions, which are indispensable to Pasternak in order to understand what he himself was trying to achieve as a poet.\(^{27}\)

The concept of “free qualities” may be considered as an answer to those questions. What poetry shares with philosophy is the first contact with reality resulting in a liberation of the things presenting themselves henceforth as a vortex of free qualities. But poetry does not venture any further to ask what exactly is this “form” to which the qualities aspire, it transforms the very idea of synthesis inherited from philosophy. If we perceive all the things in the world, without exception, as free qualities, we eliminate conceptual boundaries between them: we do not have to perpetuate any logical distinctions between subject and objects, between things and emotions, between abstract and concrete, general and particular, etc. Moreover, the interaction between things is no longer causally determined, action and reaction is one and the same event. So one can say that things lose their material boundaries as well. In other words, the subjectivity in Pasternak’s poetry belongs to the world, it is dissipated in it, and only to this extent comprises the lyrical self, whose presence is thoroughly concealed. The world without a determined Subject is a decentralized world. It is no more organized around a privileged observer, or in accord with human consciousness. Everything can act and suffer, be active and passive at the same time. The world is just constant movement, interaction between things. In this sense, Jakobson’s highly fruitful hypothesis on the metonymic character of Pasternak’s verse finds deeper, philosophical, roots (Jakobson 1969: 131-151). The metonymy then is not just a poetic device, but the way Pasternak actually perceives and feels the world. There is no single point of view anymore, but thousands of points of views, thousands of perspectives, since everything in the world, each thing, each event can offer such a perspective. So the strategy of Pasternak-the-poet is to multiply those points of view, sometimes like in instantaneous photographic shots, by moving as fast as possible from one thing or one phenomenon to another.

And yet, there is always a structuring idea, opposite categories or contraries that organize his poems, there are always a number of distinct “entities” that seem to act like major protagonists. That is why Pasternak’s poetry starts with philosophical distinctions and boundaries: between “I” and
the perceived world, subject and object, between animated and unanimated, transient and eternal, abstract and particular. But once those boundaries are established, it is the task of poetry to transcend them. In his poetry Pasternak exemplifies the processes of apperception, but not in a philosophical way: as the movement from the manifold of the world towards the unity of representation. He starts with the idea of synthesis, of apperception, of transcendental subject (never an empirical or a psychological one), which sustains its effort in keeping together this manifold of things. But he ends up privileging the contradiction between the unifying idea and the world of the particular, stating in fact the impossibility of any final apperception: the unity is only anticipated, but never achieved. That is why his use of apperception goes far beyond that reserved to philosophy, it implies also “asceticism” – a sort of ethical posture, which prevents thought from performing judgments about the world as it is, but urges it to focus on the origins of the world, the world in its potentiality.

Based on the argument of Pasternak’s work on Kleist, one can say that philosophy needs to be brought again and again to its origins, only then can it meet literature and be useful to it. By transcending itself, philosophy can regain its initial creative powers and, in some ephemeral way, join literature. If literature opens philosophy to experimentation with its frontiers by pointing out the limits of its concepts, philosophy in turn can provide a first idea, as well as a theoretical model, which can find its experimental and concrete realization in literature.

NOTES

1 Pasternak (1996, 2: 30). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Russian are mine.
2 See, for example, Lyon (2006); Hines (1976); Steiner (2011).
3 Mandelśtam’s poetry is of a special interest to contemporary philosophers, such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben or Jacques Rancière. See Badiou (2007); Rancière (2004); Agamben (2009).
4 I borrow this image from Henri Bergson. In his Creative Evolution, he suggests to consider the opposite cognitive principles, such as intellect and intuition, or intellect and instinct, in terms of nucleus and fringe (or nebula) relations. Bergson claims that our conceptual thought, our intellect, “has detached itself from a vastly wider reality, but that there has never been a clean cut between the two; all around conceptual thought there remains an indistinct fringe which recalls its origin” (Bergson 1911: 193). The intellect is thus “a luminous nucleus around which instinct, even enlarged and purified
into intuition, forms only a vague nebulosity” (ibid.: 177). I use this image to point to the permeability of relations between philosophy and poetry.

See Adorno (1973: 86-87).

Alain Badiou in his ‘Adventures of French Philosophy’ (Badiou 2005), mentions among four major “operations” of contemporary (20th century) French philosophy a new way to approach science. The French philosophers “interrogated science for models of invention and transformation that would inscribe it as a practice of creative thought, comparable to artistic activity, rather than as the organization of revealed phenomena. This operation, of displacing science from the field of knowledge to that of creativity, and ultimately of bringing it ever closer to art, finds its supreme expression in Deleuze, who explores the comparison between scientific and artistic creation in the most subtle and intimate way”. See http://www.lacan.com/badenglish.htm.

For instance, the philosophical doctrines of Bergson, James and Husserl produced an extremely significant impact on the development of the Anglo-American novel in the first half of the 20th century.

Of course, this hypothesis that I would like to defend is not consistent with any Formalist or Structuralist approach working vigorously at separating different models or functions of language, incompatible one with each other (cf. Jakobson 1987 and Jakobson 1960).

As Pasternak writes in a letter to his friend A. Štich (26 June/8 July 1912) after two subsequent presentations in Cohen’s seminar: “Cohen was pleased with me”, and in a following letter (29 June/11 July), with more enthusiasm: “Cohen was very pleased with me. I presented a second time. And analyzed Kant. Cohen was quite surprised and invited me to his house. I was very excited” (Pasternak 2003-2005, 7: 117, 121).

“I still experience outbursts of lyricism and clumsiness of creation. Cohen was for me a real infatuation” (Letter to the parents, 27 June/9 July; Pasternak 2003-2005, 7: 121).


The reasons of Pasternak’s break with philosophy were amply discussed by commentators. But the majority of them agree that Pasternak’s poetical activity continued to bear the imprints of philosophy quite a long time after the official, post-Marburg, break. As Anna Han, for example, puts it in her article on Pasternak and Špet: “Rejection of philosophy in favor of poetry did not mean rejection of the philosophical approach to the world, but only the rejection of philosophy as independent scientific discipline” (Han 1999: 51). And Lazar Fleishman even claims that Pasternak’s definitive farewell to philosophy takes place after the publication of A Safe-Conduct, in 1930-1931, when “Pasternak started to change mercilessly the whole system of his previous poetics” (Fleishman 1993: 74).

Lazar Fleishman also believes that philosophy is less thematically present in Pasternak’s writing, but manifests itself more like a method (Fleishman 1993: 73).

Art after Philosophy. Boris Pasternak’s Early Prose is the title of a new book by Elena Glazov-Corrigan (2013), where she analyzes the impact of philosophy on Pasternak’s writing, but focuses exclusively on his prose.

Angela Livingstone emphasizes the fact that Pasternak is not so much concerned with the position of a viewer of the world, as with the power that affects it: “with the problem of how to write about that power or energy”, the source of poetic creation (Livingstone 2006: 265).

In his influential interpretation of Pasternak’s early prose, Roman Jakobson puts a stress on the concealed presence of the lyrical “I” in Pasternak. “The hero […] is broken down into a series of constituent and subsidiary parts, he is replaced by a chain of concretized situations and surrounding objects” (Jakobson 1969: 146). The hero is strictly passive; he lets the world act for him and in his place. He is there only to metonymically reflect its actions.


Aleksandr Žolkovskij emphasized this parallel in one of his essays on Pasternak (Žolkovskij 2011: 16).

It is the opinion of A. Livingstone who brilliantly analyzes this poem in her above-mentioned article: ‘Philosophical Traces in Pasternak’s Poems and Poetic Prose’. She interprets the poem in terms of mutual imitation of its two protagonists, two would-be “subjects”: the rain and the “I”. When the rain asks itself, if there is a witness, it is not capable of seeing the “I” because “that person in a sense is not there, as he is wholly absorbed in imitating the rain”. In the same way, the “I” is convinced he is alone, since he denies “the presence of the rain […] because the rain is becoming him” (Livingstone 2009: 153). As she suggests further, “the philosophical idea of the interdependence and the transitoriness of subject and object really is contained in this poem” (154).

Jurij Lotman insisted upon this specificity of Pasternak’s poetry in his seminal text ‘Stichotvorenija rannego Pasternaka i nekotorye voprosy strukturnogo izučenija teksta’. He argues that Pasternak does not arbitrarily create his world, but discovers and explores the complex reality of things: his poetry is always “in search of the latent connections between the objects and essences of outer reality” (Lotman 1978: 21), his “text is oriented toward the object” (24).


“If Kleist had belonged to the circle of the Romantics, he would have written something which he might have entitled ‘Towards the Idea of Universal Playing’” (Pasternak 2010: 38). Pasternak does not offer any further details on this theory of playing, but it most certainly should be related to the notion of irony and to the playful attitude towards creation, as put into practice by a romantic author.
Aleksandrina Vigiljanskaja in her article ‘Vtoroe roždenie. Ob odnom filosofskom istočnike tvorčestva Borisa Pasternaka’ (Vigiljanskaja 2007: 131-146) emphasizes the importance of Pasternak’s essay on Kleist for understanding the nature of his engagement with philosophy.

I use Angela Livingstone’s poetic translation of the poem, except for the first stanza: for its syntactic structure which is not preserved in this translation, I turn to another, more literal version of its translation, also provided by A. Livingstone (Livingstone 2000: 25).

Nadežda Mandel’štam in her memoirs points to this specificity of Pasternak as a poet: his obsession with analyzing things, trying to understand his object from top to bottom, before tackling it poetically (Mandelstam 1999, 3: 55).

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